



The Future of Prosperity Gospel in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT:- Prosperity gospel Pentecostalism is relatively new on the religious landscape which is swiftly expanding at breath-taking speed and is now a force to be reckoned with in Nigeria with greater chances of outliving the 21st century in view of the fact that it is widely and readily being accepted by all classes of people for its claims of physical and spiritual empowerment. The methodology adopted for the study is phenomenological design. The study uncovered that there are so many factors in favour of the expansion and consolidation of prosperity gospel in Nigeria. The paper affirmed the point that prosperity gospel in its entirety is not bad but what is needed is a change in the right focus of prosperity message. Though, there are aspects of negativism in prosperity preaching, but the paper believes and concludes that God will eventually change the focus of prosperity message as preached by prosperity preachers to something more positive and rewarding.

Keywords:- Gospel, Future, Nigeria, Prosperity, Pentecostalism

I. INTRODUCTION

The global growth rate of Pentecostalism has been very dramatic and impressive over the years. Pentecostalism is such a dynamic and fluid movement that it has a wildly diverse assembly (Sinitiere, 2013). Prosperity gospel is a strand of Pentecostalism right from its source in America. At that beginning, prosperity gospel was a tiny off-shoot of Pentecostalism which is today everywhere (Ojo, 2013). Prosperity gospel is a distinctive feature of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. In the 21st century, Pentecostalism has become, as (Sinitiere, 2013) puts it “one of the most popular religious explanations for why good things happen to good people” (p.1). Since religion generally remains an influential force, one that impacts virtually everything across the globe, Pentecostalism as its off-shoot is today impacting on the Nigerian society (Kitause & Achunike, 2013).

The interest generated in prosperity preaching and the attendant growing influences, popularity and successes of the phenomenon over the years triggers up the desires to embark on this humble research by narrowing down the scope to ascertaining the probable fate of prosperity gospel in Nigeria. The main thrust of this paper is to attempt a projection into the future of prosperity gospel in Nigeria with a view to suggesting what should be the most appropriate and reasonable course of actions toward the phenomenon in this 21st century. It is incumbent upon the paper to clarify that apart from God who is all-knowing no one knows the future with any degree of absolute certainty. So, this paper is not an accurate prediction of the future of the phenomenon of prosperity gospel but a mere academic presumption and speculation as to what the future holds for prosperity gospel.

Historical Overview of Pentecostalism in Nigeria

It may be necessary to briefly go down memory lane to recast the historical origin and growth of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. Instructively, Pentecostalism is a major religious and social movement in Nigeria that is part of a growing world-wide movement (McCain, 2013). It is a diverse movement that has penetrated all areas of society such as education, business, health, social media, social development and even the highest levels of government in any country of the world.

Historically, Pentecostalism is an internally motivated socio-religious phenomenon in Africa (Achunike, 2009). This was between 1910s and 1920s when an Anglican deacon launches an indigenous

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prophetic movement that later becomes the Christ Army Church (CAC). Following an influenza epidemic in 1918, revivals flare within the mission churches and the CAC leading to the formation of prayer groups and churches to cushion the effect of the influenza (Kalu, 2008). During the 1930s and 1940s, a revival led by Joseph Babalola broke loose resulting to the establishment of Christ Apostolic Church and the arrival into Nigeria of Classical Pentecostal churches including the Assemblies of God Church and Foursquare Gospel Church among others (Pew Research Center (PRC), 2015). The 1950s saw the founding of Celestial Church of Christ, Cherubim & Seraphim society, Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) and other churches. This epoch witnessed rapid expansion of Christianity to Northern Nigeria. 1960s-1970s register a wave of revival among Charismatics ministries in tertiary institutions in Nigeria which eventually metamorphosed into Pentecostal churches like Benson Idahosa's Church of God Mission, Benin and Williams Kumuyi's Deeper Life Bible Church, Lagos (Ojo, 2006, Gaiya, 2002). From 1980s up to the present time there has been an explosion of Pentecostal denominations in Nigeria.

Factors that sustain Prosperity Gospel Pentecostalism in Nigeria

It may be easier to know that Pentecostalism is making some head ways in Nigeria than determining the extent to which it is impacting upon the Nigerian society. Pentecostalism is probably full of life in Nigeria and is steadily making advances everywhere including the mainline churches in spite of several attacks on it from different angles. What are the probable strengths of prosperity gospel Pentecostalism which is enabling it to flower amidst criticisms? And what are the likely factors that tend to promote prosperity gospel in Nigeria? This is expressed as follows:

Astronomical Expansion of prosperity ideology

Pentecostalism exemplified in prosperity preaching is assuming a grand scale expansion in contemporary Nigeria. For Phiri & Maxwell (2015), "prosperity-tinged Pentecostalism is growing faster not just than other strands of Christianity, but than all religious groups, including Islam" (p.2). This is probably true in view of the fact that Pentecostal prosperity ideas tend to be percolating faster than any other religious tenets and are steadily replacing some traditional religious ideas. According to Lin (2015):

The spread and prevalence of Prosperity Gospel ideology cannot be easily dismissed. It is an established global presence shaping cultures around the world. Given its vast reach and growing following, Prosperity Gospel Pentecostalism must be taken into consideration by anyone who is seeking to understand and explain global attitudes (p.2).

The overwhelming Popularity of Prosperity Gospel

The prosperity gospel is said to be a popular theology of modern living. It is noted to be a cluster of four themes "Faith, health, wealth and victory. In its basic form, faith - a spiritual power released through positive words and belief - can be measured by wealth and health which allows believers to aspire to total victory on earth" (Sinitiere, 2013, p.1). As reiterated by Sinitiere, since the late 1980s, there seems to be an increasing number of people that are turning eagerly toward therapeutic religion that soothes the soul, and the prosperity gospel has mastered the tone, vocabulary and approach to do just that.

II. DEEPLY ENTRENCHED POVERTY IN AFRICA

Poverty and deprivation is on high increase in Africa and other parts of the world. This work thinks that as far as poverty remains rooted in Africa and the world at large prosperity gospel is likely not going to dwindle and lose its flavour because of its appealing ideology to the poor everywhere in the world. The fact of Africans deplorable state and their likely tendency to patronise the gospel of success is justified by Phiri & Maxwell (2015) when they document that "A religion of hope gleams brightly against the bleak backdrop of African poverty. Currently, about 315 million sub-Saharan Africans live on less than a dollar a day" (P.5). This authenticates the high level of poverty in Africa. As uncovered from Africa poverty Facts, around 20,000 people perish each day due to extreme poverty and that one in three Africans suffer malnutrition. That is, a total of 852 million people in Africa are chronically or acutely malnourished (The Foundation for Community Inspiration (TFCI), 2015). Where poverty holds sway, the probability is high that people tend to quickly adopt the Pentecostal prosperity gospel than missionary Christianity. As can be deduced, poverty is a contributory factor for the thriving of prosperity gospel in the world today and this may probably go on unabated for the next thirty years. It is probably for the above reason that many Africans especially Nigerians would want to escape poverty by all means through the embracement of prosperity gospel. This might also be the reason people from other parts of the world would also want to be rich too.

The Desire and Search to get better

The desire of most under privileged people of the world to get over their predicaments of lack and backwardness lure not a small people to think positively of embracing a gospel that offers them such opportunity. To probably have more of such opportunities of listening to prosperity messages and to search out for other alternative means of livelihood, many African rural dwellers are now trooping to major cities of the world. Although there are other reasons for people's migration to urban areas, but they may not all be unconnected and far from the desire to get better off. Cities, as it is known are where prosperity churches concentrated most. It is said that as people migrate, some are brushing up against economic opportunity. As observed by Phiri & Maxwell (2015), "In Nigeria, for instance, only 14.5 percent of the population lived in cities in 1960; today, that number has grown to 43 percent. Correspondingly, financial optimism is on the rise" (p.5). The positive outcome of this is that Nigerian renewalists now testify that their finances are in excellent or good shape.

Prosperity promises/Allurement as Bait

It is seen from the above that the Nigerian prosperity Pentecostalism provokes concern and hope. It conjures up concern because of what Sinitiere (2013) describes as a whole host of worries such as "greed, crass fundraising, greasy leaders and overt religious entrepreneurialism" (p.1). It is a source of hope and comfort because of what prominent African health-and-wealthers are doing in their attempts to stem the tide of degradation in the world. Such personalities as Matthew Ashimolowo and David Olaniyi Oyedepo among others have since tried to offer tremendous promise to an economically deprived people of the world. Oyedepo for instance has promised to help the faithful to rise above Nigeria's malaise. His two universities are all geared towards graduating "kings and queens" as the succeeding generation of Christians (Oyedepo, 2006).

Today, many Africans are said to be leaving grass huts and experiencing for the first time the joys of owning a car, holding a decent job, or enrolling in college which is an indication that life is beginning to change for the best. Some others are generating wealth using business skills taught by prosperity preachers. Not a few Nigerians have equally been inspired by prosperity apostles to aim high, work hard and avoid vices capable of ruining their future. There is no doubt about the fact that the standard of living of most Nigerians have greatly improved through their embracement of prosperity gospel. This seeming benefit enjoyed by prosperity believers is probably a catalyst towards the expansion of prosperity gospel in the world today. It is being projected that prosperity gospel may probably see the light of the day in the next three decades in Africa and beyond.

A Simple-Easy-Going Theology of Sweatless Prosperity

It is revealed based on a study conducted by Pew Research Center in 2006 that the fastest growing form of Christianity in the world is Prosperity Gospel Pentecostalism. This form of Christianity teaches that God desires every believer who has enough faith to prosper in every way. As discovered, the percentage of those who were reported to have believed that "God grants material prosperity to all believers who have enough faith" are highest in Africa with 96 percent in Nigeria, 83 percent in Kenya, and 80 percent in South Africa (Lin, 2015). Records abound that so many are keying into the belief system that God can miraculously bring wealth to individuals if they have enough faith. The findings from a 39-nations survey in 2013 further shows that high number of African believe that brighter days are ahead in spite of their current challenging situations. This rosy outlook and optimism is not only limited to African countries alone but frankly speaking those of Africa is the highest. Other continents of the world are similarly experiencing a boost in the number of prosperity believers. Worthy of note is the fact that those continents with high percentages of Pentecostals as observed are expressing more positive hope about their economic fortune and future and the future of their children than those continents that are mostly dominated by the mainstream Christians.

Evangelistic Campaigns and Churches' Proliferation as a Factor

According to McCain (1999) Pentecostal churches are experiencing even greater growth in the 21st century. The Assemblies of God Church and the Deeper Life Bible Church in the view of McCain are making serious advances everywhere. In the last thirty years, these churches have grown so considerably in the global world. RCCG and the Winners Chapel among several others are equally on the rise too and have since become mega churches. Based on the projections and plans of some mega churches to evangelise the world, it is very optimistic that many nominal Christians will soon turn Pentecostals in the 21st century. This, happening will mean that more than 70 percent of the global Christian populations may become Pentecostal prosperity adherents. This percentage is only a projection which is subject to scrutiny by other scholars. The RCCG and The Deeper Life are good examples of Pentecostal churches that have taken the lead in this regard and are fast expanding in Nigeria and beyond.

According to Falaiye (2007), “The Redeemed Christian Church of God has vouchsafed to plant Churches within five minutes walking distance in every city and town of developing countries, and within five minutes driving distance in every city and town of developed countries” (p.38). No wonder, Ojo (2011) reports that RCCG is the fastest growing church today in terms of church planting. He explains further that the exponential growth of RCCG is being made possible through the zeal and commitment of the ranks and files of RCCG in pursuing Enoch Adejare Adeboye’s vision to proliferate using “Go-a-fishing” and “Christ the Redeemer’s Friend Universal approaches”. Adesanya (2011) remarks that the new innovation of RCCG does not only make the Church popular but has equally made it the largest and the fastest growing church in Nigeria as well. Today, record has shown that RCCG has over 25,411 parishes in more than 220 countries of the world (Oyodele, 2015, personal communication, February 3). Adeboye anchored his inner drive for expansion on the facts that the world like a market square is a zone of competition. According to Ukah (2003) this sense of competition captures the strategies of territorial conquest which propel the RCCG to establish parishes everywhere in a bid to overspread the world. This notion of competition oils the wheel of expansion which considerably engineered the RCCG into the global realm.

Similarly, the Deeper Life Bible Church founded by William Folorusho Kumuyi is not left out in her proliferation drive. The Deeper Life has the vision of “A House Church”. Coining and adopting an acronym “DAWN”, The Deeper Life has clarified her vision to mean “Disciple A whole Nation” which is geared towards planting a church in every two to three households (Adeseye, 2015, personal communication, January 10). At present, the Deeper Life is seen to be among the largest and fastest growing churches in Nigeria (McCain, 1999). Apart from the fact that Pentecostal churches are proliferating in Nigeria, it is necessary to document that the number of Charismatics in the mainline churches are equally multiplying too. Among them are the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Communion, Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) and Christ Apostolic Church among others (Diara, 2003, Ayegboyin & Ishola, 1999).

Numerical Growth of the Pentecostals/Charismatics Solidify Prosperity Gospel

Pentecostalism is really exploding and is remarkably impacting on the mainline churches the world over. Pentecostal churches are currently experiencing greater growth with thousands of new churches springing up almost uncontrollably everywhere in Nigeria (Kitause, 2013). Didymus (2011) affirms that in Nigeria “The explosion of Christian Churches is evident. Church buildings are always within sight no matter where one stands in a Nigerian city” (p.1). It may be necessary to point out that the expansion of Pentecostal churches around the world means a boost in the number of the Pentecostals and the Charismatics. An explosion in figure of the Pentecostals is equally the percolation and cementing of prosperity gospel. As the Pentecostals stretch across borders, prosperity gospel extends alongside as well.

As testified by Sharpe (2014) “Since the 1980s, the global growth of Pentecostalism, particularly in the developing nations has been so rapid” (p.1). Critics described this global phenomenal growth of Pentecostalism variously as a “restructuring of Christianity”, “the fourth great age of Christian expansion” and a “reshaping of the religion of the 21st century”, with the emphasis that it represents the largest shift in the religious marketplace over the last 40 years (Barrett, in Sharpe, 2014). In this growth rate, the Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians have been known to be very spectacular. History attests that “Whereas in 1970 there were 74 million “Pentecostal/charismatic” Christians globally, by 1997 this figure had reached nearly 500 million, over quarter of the world’s Christians” (Barrett, in Sharpe, 2014). Some scholars are still hesitant in accepting this global growth rate for the Pentecostals and the Charismatics. As of 2006, the Christian database estimated that Pentecostals constituted 73 percent of all Latin American Protestants from less than 50 percent in 1980. Back here in Nigeria, Pew Research Center (2015) in her 2006 Pentecostal survey reveals that “Renewalists – including Charismatics and Pentecostals – account for approximately three-in-ten Nigerians. The survey also finds that roughly six-in-ten Protestants in Nigeria are either Pentecostal or Charismatic, and three-in-ten Nigerian Catholics surveyed can be classified as Charismatic” (p.2). It is glaring on the basis of this survey that if the current growth rate of Pentecostals/Charismatics is maintained this way, there is likely going to be much more explosion of Pentecostal prosperity disciples in the world.

III. THE NATURE OF PENTECOSTALISM

The very nature of Pentecostalism is another factor why prosperity gospel may linger longer up to the next century. For one, African people seem to be naturally wired to be ecstatic in their celebrations; their exuberance is expressed during their traditional festivals and ceremonies. The emotional and boisterous nature of Pentecostal worship presents a temptation and a strong pull toward Pentecostalism. That apart, as McCain (1999) rightly observes, Pentecostalism has taken a much more literal interpretation of the teachings of the Bible about demons. This probably informs Pentecostals’ confrontation and casting out of demons around the world. This exorcism is now a regular part of nearly every Pentecostal church service in Africa and many of the non-

Pentecostal church services as well. McCain (1999) affirms that “In many African churches today, a service is not complete without a few prophecies, a healing or two, and a few demons cast out” (p.9).

The nature of Pentecostalism probably favours the proliferation of Pentecostal churches and its ideology globally. Pentecostalism is noted for its initial interracial character which challenged racial segregation as well as its historical and theological convictions in matters of faith. Through their theology and doctrine, the Pentecostals were able to cope with economic uncertainties, social ostracism and racism which not only gave them certitude about the reality of the supernatural but also helped to shield them against the encroachments of modernity (Nnamani, 2007).

Unchanging Global Trends Sustain Prosperity Theology

As observed, the global trends that are shaping the life of Christianity are unceasing. In her recent report, the World Council of Churches (WCC) (2015) acknowledges that:

The modern Pentecostal movement, for instance, which is only about one century old, now accounts for nearly one-quarter of the global Christian community. Plus, an estimated 19 million Pentecostals are added each year. The astonishing growth is one of the most dramatic stories of modern Christianity. In Rio de Janeiro, for instance, 40 new Pentecostal congregations are started every week (p.2).

Stories of churches like these are multiplied throughout the world. It is probably difficult to reveal the hard truth that churches around the world that are growing the fastest, with the most vitality, are not connected to the institutional or relational fabric of the ecumenical movement (WCC, 2015). Some of these churches exist unregistered and are speedily growing unnoticed. These are likely to be Pentecostal churches which seem to be mushrooming everywhere. Equally, it is a global experience that there seems to be more defection of members from the mainline churches to the Pentecostal churches. This partly explains the incremental upsurge of Pentecostal populations. WCC (2015) again throws more light on the stunning shift in the balance of Christian populations especially between the Pentecostals and the mainstream Christians thus:

Whereas a few decades ago 70% of all evangelicals were in the “North”, primarily in the U.S., today 70% are in the churches of the global South. At the beginning of the 20th Century, 81% of Christians were white. By the century’s end, the number was 45%. 542 million Pentecostals (more than the total of Christians in all the churches belonging to the WCC) continue their rapid growth throughout the world (p.12).

This citation testifies to the fact that the Pentecostals from all indications are really pulling crowd for reasons which may not be very far from their earnest desire to achieve economic freedom and upward mobility. Phil & Maxwell (2015) report that “Last December, the world’s largest Christian gathering - about 3 million people – assembled at Oyedepo’s pyramid-shaped Winners Chapel on the pristine Canaan Land estate. Every Sunday, traffic crawls as thousands flock to multiple services” (p.5). Oyedepo who is the world’s leading prosperity apostle has a 54,000-seat capacity auditorium, reputed to be the world’s largest Christian Centre of worship. Oyedepo has been described as a “Larger-than-life figure” always poised like a chief leading his followers toward better lives (Phil & Maxwell, 2015).

Prosperity Gospel as Immunity against Witchcraft and Problems

The Christian world though rejoices over the phenomenal quantitative growth of the Church in Africa but at the same time laments at its immaturity and lack of depth (Harries, 2000). The Church is probably expanding in quantity without real qualitative expansion. In times of life crises, most Christians, probably can hardly withstand strong temptations which is one of the reasons for syncretism in Africa. Without iota of doubt, prosperity churches preach salvation through Jesus Christ to millions of people around the world (Phiri & Maxwell, 2015), who probably repent from their sins and get born again, but hardly do these churches follow up the converts as expected. This makes many Christians to have shallow root in Christ. The after effect is that Christians remain baby Christians and can hardly exercise personal faith in God for their everyday protection and guidance from God. So the prosperity gospel which promises people protection of any kind after their due payment through seed faith for protection and prosperity remains the last resort for most Christians in the 21st century. The rich and the poor, the educated and uneducated, the young and the old all need protection. And when any alternative for protection is given people tend to rush for it no matter the cost. Africans who believe in magical powers tend to patronise prosperity gospel for what it offers – immunity to witchcraft and curses as taught by its many apostles.

This explains another probable reason for the mushrooming of prosperity teachings in Africa. To some extent, it is held that those who suffer frequent attacks and are prone to problems might have probably backslidden from the faith or failed to adhere to protection principles of keep fit. In another dimension, it is believed that a Christian who is a faithful tither and gives generously is immune to problems of whatever type. If immunity is guaranteed by simply paying tithes and being generous to people, then it is worth doing. Here again lies another explanation for the massive adoption of prosperity gospel by most people. For even the single

presumption that prosperity gospel has immunity to all worldly challenges makes its future to be very bright among the down trodden of the world.

Prosperity Gospel as Socially Relevant to All Societies of the World

That apart, it is becoming a public knowledge that prosperity gospel is not just about money and immunity to witchcraft, curses and other problems. Although many people are currently in disarray about some of the questionable and callous behaviour of prosperity prophets, but as sensed by Sinitiere (2013) “millions of believers choose this message [prosperity message] every Sunday because it uses a Christian framework to remind them that God cares about the details of their lives” (p.3). True to its claims, prosperity Pentecostalism which seems to be “explicitly individualistic and implicitly communal or social” (Daniels, in Sinitiere, 2013) adapt itself to the local indigenous societies of most people and is apparently “growing amidst the poor and the marginalized, providing communal support in situations of social disintegration, and living as a true “church of the poor” seeking both spiritual and physical empowerment to free themselves through God’s power from oppression” (p.3).

Prosperity Gospel Pentecostalism appears to operate on a strong missional commitment of embracing a holistic gospel, even though to some certain extents it falls short of this. But prosperity Pentecostalism integrates evangelism among its core value and engages in social actions that address many societal ills, thus providing relief for many disadvantaged people in the society. Apart from this, it has explored means and has equally proved its ability to creatively contextualize the Christian faith in Africa in many practical ways including tackling issues of poverty, healing and deliverance. Furthermore, so long as people keep enjoying infrastructural developments and social services provided by these prosperity teachers which indeed prove to be strong allurements and ensnarement to people’s strong attachment to the prosperity gospel. This equally provides a firm conviction that prosperity gospel will survive any threat to its being strangled in the future.

The Probable End of Prosperity Gospel

In view of the apparent bright future which prosperity Pentecostalism tend to have, this work makes the point that it seems that there will come a time when prosperity seekers will get disillusioned with the prosperity principle of sowing and reaping. It is reasoned that when people keep overstretching their ability to sow seed of faith in prosperity ministries and churches without any positive outcome, they will eventually get discouraged at some point. The unrecoverability syndrome in people will eventually propel them to take decisive actions against prosperity gospel. There may emerge a supernatural cause that may turn the hands of the clock anti clockwise. As it turns out to be during Jesus earthly ministry, the same people that witnessed and enjoyed Jesus’ miracle of food multiplications; who ate the same food to their fill until there were many left overs, who indeed wanted to make Jesus King for his constant benevolent to them suddenly turned out against him and later shouted “crucify him” “crucify him” and release for us Barabbas, a robber. This may be how the prosperity gospel may turn out to be at the final end of it. God may as he did in the case of Jim Baker arrange unpleasant circumstance in the life of prosperity preachers and may use the same event to turn the life of such preachers around for good to start correcting their distorted theology of prosperity.

IV. CONCLUSION

So far this paper makes a projection into the likely future of prosperity gospel in Nigeria. It has been able to establish that the future of prosperity gospel Pentecostalism is very bright in this century. This is owing to numerous factors which are identified as favourable to the expansion and consolidation of this gospel in Nigeria and the outside world. The findings show that prosperity gospel will flourish as long as people are challenged continuously with poverty and backwardness. The fact that prosperity ministers always benefit maximally from peddling prosperity gospel brightens its chances to blossom extraordinarily with the potential of outliving even the 21st century.

On the other hand, it is pre-empted that all those false preachers who only preach to gain financially will at the end of the day outlive their usefulness and suffer extinction. This paper thinks that the negativism of prosperity gospel will become the undoing of the gospel. God will eventually discomfit and triumph over all the negative aspects of prosperity gospel. That is to say that prosperity gospel in its entirety is not bad but what is needed is a change in the right focus of prosperity message. God, it is believed will eventually change the focus of prosperity message to something more positive and rewarding. God will cause a revival within the prosperity gospel circles that will take care of issues related to sweat-less prosperity, financial scandal and the moral failure of the prosperity gospel leaders as he did to Jim Bakar. It is likely that God will raise more holiness preachers to get involve in preaching true prosperity as well as evangelizing false prosperity preachers and believers. This will assists prosperity adherents to eventually discover their misapprehension and excesses of the gospel and start preaching or pursuing prosperity the right way.

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